



Managing Them One at a Time

by Curt Olson

It's one thing to know how your herd is performing in general and another to know how each individual animal is doing. To get the most performance out of your herd, you need to know the details about the individuals in it.

Herd performance data such as conception rates, pounds per weaned calf, etc., give producers a good handle on the group average. When this data is examined over time, it can show trends or directions the herd is going.

"Trends are completed once a year and take a long time to compile," writes Kris Ringwall, Extension beef specialist for North Dakota State University.

However, to make desired changes in your operation will take good individual records that will help determine which cows or bulls are most productive and helping their owners reach their goals. One way of doing that is comparing your data against EPDs, expected progeny differences.

As the industry increasingly calls for specific products, producers are going to need specific information to help deliver them. The old saying of "you can't manage what you don't measure" applies here. It starts with some form of ID that is hopefully carried forward in the beef system, a process that sounds simpler than it is to do.

"I think for us to be in the beef industry (as opposed to the grass business or the calf business) we need to be moving information up and down the chain, from the time the calf drops to the ground to when it enters the food chain," says Anne Burkholder. She and her husband run Will Feed in Cozad, Neb. "I think the future of the beef industry lies with individual identification and the ability to send cattle performance information back to the producer."

And from her point of view, that doesn't have to be electronic ID, especially if the cattle are moving straight to a feedyard and on to a packer. However, if cattle start getting split up or sold through auction markets to new owners who aren't sending them directly to the yard, electronic ID may be the best way for someone to track their animals.

She has cultivated a feedyard customer base that wants information back. It isn't always simple getting it. It takes persistence to get carcass data back. Sometimes Anne finds it difficult to get even group data from a packer, much less individual data, even though it exists.

"I don't want to see the beef industry be integrated like the poultry industry," she says, "but we can work together. We all need each other to make our industry work. If we can't trace what we're producing, we can't put the pieces of the puzzle together in the best way. There's a lot of things



that go into creating a calf that works. It has to work for the cow-calf guy. At the same time we need animals that are going to perform well in the feedyard and at the packing plant."

An ID that passes along the production chain provides the producer the chance to find out how the cattle do once they leave the farm gate. Do they gain well or even OK in the feedyard? Do they stay healthy? How do they do on the rail in the plant?

"The average of a group is nice to visit about and present, but it is the individual data that expands a producer's ability to manage a cow herd," writes Ringwall. "The individual numbers allow for more effective utilization of the data."

Individual data helps producers determine which cows and bulls are doing the job and producing the right product. Individual data allow producers to sort, manage and market their cattle better.

"I think there are people out there that are scared to identify their animals for many different reasons," Anne says. "I would be scared not to. I think I do a good job and I'm proud of what I produce."

Having grown up outside the industry, she says it's easy for her to view it as consumers do, which is why she believes it is so important to get information flowing through the system. ID helps with disease surveillance and trace back, and management. Trace back provides more transparency to consumers and shows that producers are willing to stand behind their product.

"I think they're both going to be intrinsically tied to whether we're going to be in business in 30 years," she says. "Identifying and tracing cattle is all a matter of priority, one which, in exchange for a little bit of extra time, offers a tremendous management and herd health tool in addition to boosting consumer confidence."